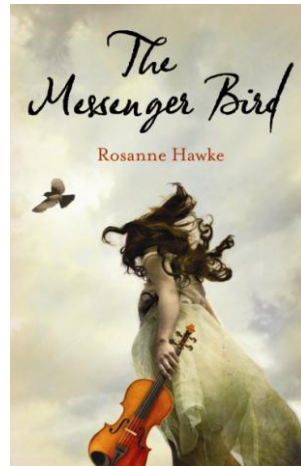


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The Messenger Bird

Rosanne Hawke



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising Teacher Librarian
in context with the Australian Curriculum
(English and History)

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SYNOPSIS

Sixteen-year-old Tamar has recently lost her older brother Trystan in a car accident. With her mother in hospital after a breakdown, Tamar and her father find it difficult to deal with their loss. Instead, they bury their grief and busy themselves in restoring their old Cornish farmhouse in rural South Australia.

When Tamar finds an old photograph of a young man and a piece of music entitled 'The Maiden's Prayer' behind the fireplace, she starts to play the piano for the first time since Trystan's death. Mysteriously, the young man from the photo, Nathaniel, appears in the room and accompanies Tamar on the violin.

Here begins a beautiful relationship between two characters from different centuries. Both are dealing with extreme pain and grief; both find solace in one another's company and in the healing power of music.

Narrated through three different points of view, *The Messenger Bird* is a modern gothic story that intertwines Cornish folktales and Celtic beliefs with music, the past and the present.

THEMES

Death and Grief:

- Tamar and her father find it difficult to grieve for Trystan. They bury their grief rather than deal with their loss.
- Tamar blames herself and Trystan's girlfriend for his death.
- Nathaniel has lost his sister, Emily. He too is grieving.
- The relationship between Tamar and Nathaniel helps both to process their grief and move forward.
- Tamar and her father finally seek counselling, but only after much pain and time has passed.
- Tamar is also grieving over her mother's hospitalisation. She deeply feels the loss of both her brother and her mother in her life.
- Tamar's father uses the restoration of the house as a distraction from his own grief.

Family and Friendship:

- Tamar finds it difficult to face friends and engage in her usual activities in the months following Trystan's death.
- Gavin, a newcomer to the region, tries to befriend Tamar, however she is distant and removed.
- It is Nathaniel's friendship that helps Tamar begin to face the death of Trystan and slowly move forward.

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Music:

- Music is a healing agent for both Tamar and Nathaniel.
- Music brings Tamar through her grief and connects her with Nathaniel.
- Music also connects Tamar to the present; she begins to slowly re-emerge into the life she enjoyed before Trystan's death, in which music played a significant role.

Cultural Identity and Diversity:

- Tamar has Filipino and Cornish heritage.
- She identifies strongly with her Celtic/Cornish identity but is learning about her Filipino heritage too.
- Migrants bring with them aspects of their cultural heritage; over time, their heritage melds with and helps reshape their new homeland's cultures and traditions.

Belonging:

- Tamar questions what it means to belong. She wonders how you work out where you belong. Does someone else make up your mind for you, or do you gradually get used to where you are? Is it about missing that place if you were removed?
- Nathaniel says that, 'I don't think belonging is only connected with where we live.' (p135)

Messenger Birds:

- Different cultures use messenger birds; for instance, in Indigenous stories, the willy wagtail is a messenger of death.
- Birds are widely accepted as being associated with the soul, as messengers from the gods or from other worlds.
- The Celts believed in messengers who could traverse time and space.
- The author has used Nathaniel as a sort of messenger bird from the past, coming to help Tamar through her loss and grief.

History's Effect on the Present:

- The past has a profound effect on the present. It is through understanding one's past that the present makes sense.

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WRITING STYLE

The Messenger Bird has three different narrators – Tamar, Gavin and Glanville Park, the property that both Tamar and Nathaniel live in. Tamar's and Gavin's chapters are written in first person, past tense. Their narratives are set in the present day. Glanville Park's narration, however, tells Nathaniel's story. It takes the audience to the late nineteenth century, to the time during which Nathaniel's parents ran the property now owned by Tamar's family.

Rosanne Hawke uses many Cornish and Celtic folktales to weave her story of mystery, despair and hope. This is combined with a core focusing on music and its importance to both Tamar and Nathaniel.

STUDY NOTES

The title and front cover of *The Messenger Bird* tell the reader something about the novel. Discuss the imagery and title, including points such as:

- The era in which this story may be set – the dress, violin, hairstyle, etc.
- What might a messenger bird be? Have you come across this term before?

Discuss the gothic genre.

- What does this genre encompass?
- What are some well-known examples of gothic fiction? (e.g. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Rebecca*)

Discuss the author's choice to start her novel with a newspaper clipping.

- Why is this an effective way to draw the reader into the story?
- The first sentence of Chapter 1 is a good example of a gripping story starter. Discuss the importance of having gripping first sentences when writing.

Write a reflection of a time you heard bad news.

- Do you recall what you were doing?
- This could be the death of a famous person (Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse), a loved one/pet, or a natural disaster (the earthquake in Christchurch, the floods in Queensland, Cyclone Yasi, The Black Saturday bushfires).

Rosanne Hawke uses figurative language to help enrich her characters' thoughts and feelings.

- As you are reading, keep a journal listing examples of this type of language and discuss how they contribute to the text.
- Some examples include:

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- ‘the unfairness and randomness of death...eats into your thoughts like acid.’ (p3)
- ‘For Dad, this house was like a new piece of music to play.’ (p21)
- ‘Dad said I had a short wick on my candle.’ (p26)
- ‘I loved watching Henry run. It was a fluid movement, controlled and arched, like a black phrase mark on my music and just as smooth.’ (p26)

Tamar writes out part of an Emily Dickinson poem.

- Read some poems from Emily Dickinson’s *Hope*.
 - Select one that represents the theme of hope in *The Messenger Bird* to share with the class.
 - Discuss its significance to the text.

Many texts are mentioned in *The Messenger Bird*, including *Rebecca*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and a range of Cornish folktales.

- Consider reading one of these texts (or extracts from) and compare with *The Messenger Bird*.

‘The Maiden’s Prayer’ plays a significant role in *The Messenger Bird*.

- Discuss how this song is threaded throughout the story and the way in which it brings the worlds of Tamar and Nathaniel together.

Tamar seems obsessed with things from the past – the clothing, the stories and the music.

- Why has the author shaped Tamar’s character in this way?

Nathaniel and Gavin are from two different centuries and have never met.

- Do you think they’d get along?
- Are they different from each other or similar?
- Discuss, giving reasons from the text to support your opinions.

The notion of time travel is achieved quite subtly in *The Messenger Bird*.

- How has the author interwoven Celtic beliefs about worlds existing at the same time with messengers hovering between the different worlds (p48) and other literary texts about time travel such as *The Time Machine*?
- As a reader, do you find Nathaniel a tangible and believable character?
- How does his inclusion fit with the gothic novel genre?

Those chapters narrated by the Glanville Park property take the reader to an era very different from modern times.

- Write a descriptive passage or create a drawing or painting of Glanville Park, showing it as it would have been in 1885.

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- Include details such as using the coppers on washing day, or being transported in horse and carriage.

As a reader, do you prefer the modern scenes with Tamar and her dad or those from Nathaniel's day? Discuss.

What does Gavin mean when he says, 'you can tell a lot about a girl by what blokes don't say'? (p24)

The reader can also tell a lot about Gavin after reading Chapter 4.

- Create a character portrait of Gavin, showing what can be inferred about his character from this chapter.

When Jack O'Reilly's body is found down the well, a fantail was dancing slowly in the shadows of the olive tree (p138). Discuss the theme of messenger birds in relation to this scene.

Did Nathaniel feel he always belonged at *Glanville Park*? Discuss.

Why wouldn't Nathaniel let Tamar come to his time? Why wouldn't he stay with Tamar permanently?

Phillip plays a minor yet important role in *The Messenger Bird*. Discuss this role.

Gavin has also experienced loss – the loss of his family's property and displacement from that land. How has Gavin dealt with this loss?

On p241, a newspaper article tells of Nathaniel's death in a fire.

- Discuss the author's decision to use newspaper articles to announce the deaths of both Trystan and Nathaniel.

Use a range of old objects as stimulus for writing activities.

- These could include old photographs or pieces of music as used in *The Messenger Bird* or other collectables such as crockery, tools, table linen, letters, etc.

On p 26, Tamar says, 'my grandad always said you mustn't kill a willie wagtail as they're messenger birds.'

- Discuss the importance of messenger birds and birds in other literary texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Discuss *Playing Beatie Bow* as another comparison text.

The olive tree plays an important role in *The Messenger Bird*.

- Brainstorm all the scenes in which the olive tree features.

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- How has the author used this tree to link Nathaniel's and Tamar's worlds?

Tamar's healing process is represented through the changing of seasons.

- Discuss how the author has used the seasons to show the passage of time and healing.

The grieving process is an important theme in *The Messenger Bird*.

- Consider inviting a guest speaker or school counsellor to speak with students about dealing with grief.

There are a number of picture books that deal with the theme of grief that could be used with younger audiences, such as *Old Pig*, *The Sound of the Sea*, *Lucy's Bay*, *Harry and Hopper*.

Research music's role in the healing process.

History has a profound influence on Tamar's life.

- Examine how and why history affects one's present.
 - How is Tamar's life influenced by the past?
 - What is your history? How does it affect your present?

Create a short narrative using two voices or try writing a dual narrative with a partner.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

It took me three months to be able to play my father's music after he died. When I did, I had a warm sense of my father's closeness. I decided music has the power to do almost anything: instigate a story, make something magical happen, be a link of communication between people, even bring someone back from the past. In that moment, *The Messenger Bird* was conceived.

It took many years to take shape – I found a photo of a young man in an antique shop which became the photo that Tamar finds. We moved to an old Cornish farmhouse near Kapunda. My husband ripped up the floorboards to reveal original cedar stairs leading to underground rooms. What family boards up a whole floor? That gave me the plotline in the past. I kept finding fragments of crockery in the 160-year-old garden. These crockery fragments became a metaphor for the way I wrote the story in fragments and in three voices. Then, we lost so many young people on our rural roads. This gave the complication in Tamar's life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosanne Hawke is an award-winning South Australian author. She has lived in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates as an aid worker for ten years. Her books include *Marrying Ameerah*, *The Keeper*, *Soraya*, *The Storyteller* and *Mustara*. She is a Carclew, Asialink, Varuna and May Gibbs Fellow, and a Bard of Cornwall. She teaches Creative Writing at Tabor Adelaide, and writes in an old Cornish farmhouse with underground rooms near Kapunda.